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The President Makes a Negotiable Offer

The president played it near Peoria, but he did himself a world of good in London, Paris, Bonn and Moscow. For in his address to his alma mater, Eureka College, on Sunday he buried a part of his past and took a major step toward arms control by making the Russians an offer they cannot easily afford to refuse.

Fierce hostility to arms control marked the Reagan administration when it took office. The butt of criticism was the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) negotiated by the Carter administration with the Brezhnev regime, but never ratified by the Senate. Critics included Reagan and the chief officials of the Defense Department under Secretary Caspar Weinberger. Allied with them were the head of the CIA, William Casey, and the director of the disarmament agency, Eugene Rostow.

As a general matter, they argued that arms control worked to paralyze the will of this country and its allies for rebuilding defenses. More specifically, they charged that SALT II enshrined Soviet military superiority. For it applied limits to the one area where this country was clearly out front—number of warheads. But it did not circumscribe Russia's great advantage—throw-weight, or the payload of the many warheads that could be put on a single monster missile.

A first breach was made last fall by demonstrations among the European allies against our position on the basing of new intermediate-range nuclear missiles on the Continent. In response, the Reagan administration proposed that this country would abandon the plan for new weapons if the Russians dismantled the modern missiles they had targeted on Western Europe. That "zero-option" proposal on intermediate nuclear forces is now the subject of Big Two negotiations in Geneva. But all along it has been clear that the allies

would continue to support this country only if the Reagan administration also brought forth a proposal for dealing on long-range or strategic weapons that was negotiable with the Soviets.

For months there has been raging inside the administration a fight on that issue. Weinberger and his allies have been calling for deep cuts that would force the Russians back to a position of equality in throw-weight. In one demonstration of their strength they were able to change the name of the game—from SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) to START (for Strategic Arms Reduction Talks).

The State Department claims that deep cuts would not be "negotiable" with the Russians. But until recently that argument carried little weight. "I began to think," one official at State lamented, "that being for a negotiable position showed a want of character."

At that point the nuclear freeze movement came to the rescue. The freeze-niks set against the technical arguments of the deep-cutters a political position. They moved out front of the president on the peace issue. Reagan had to top them, and he had to do it before going to Europe for various meetings with the allies next month.

His decision came last Thursday. At a meeting of the National Security Council, the president basically sided with State. In explanation it was said that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, led by Chairman David Jones, had also backed State. But how

come the chiefs came out into the open against the secretary of defense?

The answer is that they were asked to by the national security staff, now led by William Clark and his deputy, Robert McFarlane. In that way Clark and McFarlane offset the secretary of defense by calling forth the chiefs, and made it possible for the president to make a political decision favoring arms control. It was, in the words of the president's political counselor, Edwin Meese, "an appropriate counterpoint" to the freeze movement.

The exact terms of the U.S. position the president broached at Eureka are still not fully clear. But in a first phase there would be reductions of about a third in nuclear warheads—from roughly 7,500 apiece to roughly 5,000. Throw-weight would be postponed to a second phase.

While the Russians are almost certain to enter negotiations on those terms, they will not easily buy the American

position. For they have always wanted to include bombers in the negotiations, and the Reagan proposal applies only to land- and sea-based missiles. Moreover, the Russians are now clearly beset by leadership problems, and a recrudescence of difficulties in Poland.

Thus the negotiations are apt to be long and hard. As they drag out, opportunities will crop up for those opposed to arms control to introduce new obstacles of a complex, technical kind. So it is important to keep the pressure on the administration.

The right step at this point is for the true believers to move beyond the call for a freeze to support for SALT II, or a quick variation of it that might be called Interim START. Support for the treaty that has already been negotiated keeps the administration exactly where it ought to be on arms control—under pressure to do better.

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